



The Hero and the Goddess

The Odyssey as Pathway to Personal Transformation

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Excerpt: Chapter 8 Exercises

Exercise I

Meeting the Sirens

The Sirens' Call can come in many ways, but here we will experience a particularly delightful, and indeed salutary, version of it. As with the Sirens themselves, people have to be dragged away from this process. It involves listening to things you have always wanted to hear about yourself.

TIME: Ten minutes.

MATERIALS NEEDED: None.

MUSIC: None.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SOLO VOYAGER: Stand in front of a mirror for several minutes and say absolutely smashing things about yourself to your own image. To experience the process even more fully, make a tape of yourself singing your praises—or even better, ask a friend or two to do it for you—and play the tape while standing in front of the mirror and adding your own flattering commentary nonstop for about two minutes.

SCRIPT FOR THE GUIDE: For this process, the group needs to break up into threesomes, with one person in the middle and the other two on either side. Before we start, let me explain the procedure. The person in the middle takes the role of Odysseus, who will soon listen to the most wonderful things being said to him or her. The people on either side will take the role of Sirens, but you will also be the sailors who bound Odysseus to the mast so that he could not escape. You will do that by holding the middle person by the arms.

Then you will each place your mouth close to the ear of the middle person and begin to speak to her or him. Very close to the ear so that the two voices are inescapably pouring into the ears of the listener in the middle. You will say extraordinary and flattering things, which are more or less true, about the person in the middle. You will speak simultaneously, although each person is saying something different. It is this experience of two different voices saying different things spilling into the ear that is so dizzying and Siren-like. Speak very rapidly for perhaps two minutes. As an example, one person might be saying something like this:

“You are really the most wonderful person I know. You are so handsome and strong and courageous, and you have the best ideas and the most intelligent way of looking at things. You’re cute too. I’d vote for you for president any day. Whenever you walk into a room everyone becomes alive because you’re there. You light up everything. I’ve never known anyone with so much grace and charm

Meanwhile the person at the other ear might be saying something like:

“Fascinating! You are the most fascinating person I know, and yet so profound. With your personality and brilliance you can do anything you want—and help everybody while you’re doing it. Not since

George Washington has there been your equal. And kind! You are so kind. The milk of human kindness just rolls through your veins. And good too. You're like the next step in human evolution. When I grow up I want to be just like you

[At this point the guide might want to select two other people and demonstrate this process.]

The person in the middle just takes it all in as his or her due and basks in all the glory. Since it's coming so fast and furious this person has no time to block or doubt or disparage. He or she can only accept these wonderful things being said as the gifts of knowledge concerning true conditions from the Sirens.

After several minutes have elapsed I will call time, and the second person will go into the middle and become Odysseus while the first person will take up a new role as Siren and give as good as he or she got. Then I will call time again and the third person will have a chance to be bound to the raft and listen to the Sirens call.

Now we will begin. Separate into groups of three people if you have not already done so and let one sit in the middle. Those playing the Sirens' role, sit so that your mouth is very close to the ear of your Odysseus.

On your mark. Get set. Sirens' Call! [One to two minutes.]

Stop! Now change places so that one who had been a Siren goes in the middle, and the middle person becomes a Siren.

On your mark. Get set. Sirens' Call! [One to two minutes.]

Stop! Change places again so that the remaining Siren gets to be in the middle.

On your mark. Get set. Sirens' Call! [One to two minutes.]

Stop! Now, spend a few minutes discussing among yourselves what you have experienced.

[Almost invariably people will be giddy and quite delighted at what has happened. The guide may want to have the group at large share some of their findings after the initial sharing in threesomes. It is also interesting to discuss possible applications of this exercise in everyday life.]

Exercise II

Walking the Line Between Scylla and Charybdis

TIME: Forty-five minutes.

MATERIALS NEEDED: A large floor area without rugs and a good deal of masking tape, or strings taped down in many and varied paths, zigzags, circles, intersections.

MUSIC: Many short selections of many different kinds and styles of music: classical, rock, ragas, pop, ragtime, and so forth.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SOLO VOYAGER: This exercise can be done alone if the instructions and the variety of music are prerecorded. When you're laying masking tape on the floor, make sure that you put odd obstacles on the path. Optimally, for this exercise, it would be helpful for you to get another person to lay out the path and its obstacles for you, so that it will be a surprise.

SPECIAL NEEDS: Throughout this process, the guide will be required to act as a diversionary expert. If the size of the group warrants it, one or more other persons may also serve in this capacity, as pests on the path.

SCRIPT FOR THE GUIDE: I'd like each one of you to very quickly make a list of the things that tempt you into diversions from your life path. List all the things that lure you away from the way you wish to go. Write them very quickly without giving them any particular thought. These diversions or distractions can

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be good, bad, or indifferent. They can even be lures to transcendent experience. But whatever they are, they keep you from following your Path of Possibility. You have two minutes of clock time equal to all the time that you need to make this list. [Two minutes.]

All right. Now take a minute to review the list a number of times so it's very much in your mind. Review the list. [One minute.]

Now release the list and forget it for a while.

I want each of you to find a place on one of those lines laid out on the floor. You'll try to walk the path and stay on that line, neither falling to left or right or forward or backward.

In other words, you will stick to your path, able to go past the Sirens of knowledge, past the snatching heads of Scylla and the great maw of Charybdis. Naturally, as you try to stay on the line we'll try to distract you in a variety of ways.

Even though you've just finished going over your lists of all the things that distract you in your life, you're going to try not to think about these distractions. Instead, you're going to keep your mind and your feet on the task. And the task is very simple: to stay present and stay on that line.

This is a lot like the game you played as a child about not stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk lest you fall through into some dreaded world. Only this adult version is much worse and much more difficult. The cracks on the sidewalk are everything but the line. As soon as random distracting thoughts come in, or diversionary tactics are played on you, you pull your focus back to the line you're trying to walk.

Above all you must not suffer the diversion of running into each other, but rather step carefully around each other in order to stay on the line. To provide as rich an experience as possible during your walk between Scylla and Charybis, we will play many different kinds of music. One kind of music will come on, and then it will stop and another kind of music will come on. All right. As the music starts, begin your walk on the lines.

[As participants walk the lines, the guide and his or her assistant(s) try to distract them by talking to them, mocking them, placing large and small obstacles in the middle of their paths, throwing balls, and so forth. Many, many different kinds of music are played, and the mood maintained by the guide and the assistant(s) should be alternately raucous, teasing, alluring, and just plain obnoxious.] [Fifteen to twenty minutes.]

You have now safely navigated your way through the straits of Scylla and Charybdis. But don't stop to celebrate, for you have yet to face the trial of the cattle of the Island of the Sun. It was there, you remember, that Odysseus' men failed to heed his warnings not to eat of the cattle and violent storms spun them away. So spin now through the room. Spin through the room. Spin through the room. Lost. Shipwrecked again. Spin through the room. Faster. Spinning faster and faster. After all that precision, now spinning, spinning. A vortex of waters spinning you like mad through the room. Spinning and spinning and spinning and spinning. Storm-tossed and spinning. [Two minutes.]

And now, as the exhausted, half-drowned Odysseus, collapse on Calypso's Isle. And rest. [After the participants have rested for a minute or two, the guide can invite discussion of what they have experienced while walking the lines. Questions can be asked as to what happened to them physically, mentally, emotionally. Some typical responses to this process have been:

- I felt one-pointed.
- Every time the distractions came in, I lost balance.
- A symbol of about half the things I wrote on my list occurred during the walking.
- When the guide tried to interfere with me, I had to refrain from telling her her soul was in danger.
- I pretended that I was on a road that was about three thousand feet above ground, and if I responded to anything it would mean that I would lose my balance. Then at one point somebody came up and tried to pass me, and then her foot went off. And that meant in my reality that she tumbled to her death, and I had to keep going and not be distracted by that.
- Somebody put a bench on my line, and I saw it, trying to not see it. And I went under it, and then when I got to the other side, I just had to sit on the line and laugh, because it was so funny.
- I found that the incredible sense of the music made it easier to stay on the line.
- The music was an enormous distraction. I found myself stopping whenever it stopped.

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In response to what this process told participants about their lives, here are some of their answers:

- My life is an immensely distractive process.
- I just got it. At one point when you urged everybody to spin, my first urge was to go comfort someone, comfort anyone. So I sought out Jerry because I knew he had a sore knee. So I was going to comfort him. And I realize in my life that's my big distraction. I get off my goal because I'm going out to nurture and comfort and be a great person.
- It was important for me to let what happened on the outside flow through rather than to fight against it. When I fought against it I began to lose the balance. I just let it move right through and the balance was very simple. This is what I've learned in my forty-eight years of living.
- It was interesting to me to note what I did with the distractions. I was vehement about them. If I came to a bench, instead of going over or under it or playing with it, I just picked it up and moved it off the line. I got to take off two benches and a blanket!

And I just felt really good about that because that's what do when I'm successful in solving problems. I move them off the line.

Here is a case of someone distracted by her own perfection:

Jean, I'd just like to address this to everyone. I hope this doesn't come up for me daily. I had a very mixed experience, and I feel if I share it maybe it will go away a little bit.

First of all I think I am pretty distracted in my life and I wrote down a big list. When I got out here it was the easiest thing I have ever done to stay very centered. I had my hands in my pockets, so little did I need to use any other kind of balance. I was right on.

And what has come up is incredible self-righteousness and arrogance. I thought nobody here listened. Nobody here heard the directions. Everybody was hopping and jumping. Everybody was stopping when the music stopped.

And what has come up for me is that I find that I am totally consumed by arrogance and self-righteousness. Not that everybody else couldn't do it, but they didn't listen, didn't do what they were supposed to. I guess it was a kind of Sirens' Call, my constant commentary on how easy it was. "Look at all these fools and louts," I would think. "Look at them falling by the way. Look at how wonderful I am. I am perfect." And this turned out to be the ultimate distraction

To which I replied, "See? You failed perfectly!"

Someone else responded to this by asking,

Well, I'd like to ask her if she felt she was walking the line in her mind. Because that's what struck me as interesting because of the level. I was thinking so many times I'm walking the line with my body, and not walking it with my mind. And which am I doing now and which am I doing in my life? And I can really identify with your experience. I have that problem also.

After this discussion the guide might suggest to the participants that they take careful note in the days and weeks ahead of how often and in what ways they are distracted and what they have to do to stay focused and mindful. This metaphor of walking the line between Scylla and Charybdis can stay with you as a powerful impetus to mindfulness.]

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